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ABSTRACT

The study examined the origins of higher education student assessment policy in Virginia, the current attitudes regarding assessment, and the implications and apparent directions of assessment policy in Virginia. The primary data sources were interviews with public officials and various document sources such as State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) reports since 1958 and reports and manuals of executive agencies and legislative commission reports on the status of higher education. Information is presented as follows: (1) the development of assessment policy in Virginia (influenced by SCHEV's determination to promote curricular reform at the undergraduate level, a national mood calling for assessment of student learning and institutional reform, and SCHEV's anticipation of the assessment movement that was gaining force nationally and within the state legislature); (2) expectations for assessment in Virginia (SCHEV's expectations and state officials' expectations); and (3) implications of assessment in Virginia (policy priorities for higher education, assessment as a component of the budget, assessment and the power of SCHEV, and assessment and the renewal of teaching and learning). A summary focuses on: Virginia in the context of other states; Virginia and New Jersey--similar rhetoric, different models; and national standards. Contains 54 references. (SM)

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A Study of the Development of Student Assessment Policy in Virginia

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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted of the development of student assessment policy in Virginia, the expectations of state policy makers for this policy, and the implications of the policy for future state - higher education interaction. It was found that the broad guidelines for institutional assessment in Virginia were reflective of vague expectations and primary interest in employing assessment as a catalyst for institutional self-review and reform of the undergraduate curriculum.

A Study of the Development
of
Student Assessment Policy in Virginia

Introduction

Since the late 1960s concerns have been articulated in various forums over the quality and public accountability of institutions of higher education. Journal articles, state and national commissions, educational organizations and agencies both public and private have asserted the need for colleges and universities to provide clear and broadly acceptable measures of what they do and how well they do it (Association of American Colleges, 1985; Bowen, 1977; Corson, 1975; Drucker, 1969; Ewell, 1987a; McConnell, 1981; National Governor's Association, 1986; Resnick, 1987; State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 1972a).

In the early 1970s accountability tended to be strongly influenced by efforts to quantify the inputs and general outputs of higher education (Brubacher & Rudy, 1976; Lawrence, Weathersby, & Patterson, 1970). In the 1980s such interests have not abated, but have shifted from scrutiny of measures of faculty workload, uniform fiscal data systems, and economic efficiency measures. Instead, greater attention has been directed toward obtaining evidence of the effectiveness of colleges and universities in educating students.

Such concerns for the quality of higher education outcomes seem to have risen in tandem with growing demands on public resources, creating an environment in which a sense of need for evidence of both budgetary efficiency and educational effectiveness have become compelling to officials in many states (Bender,

1977; Bowen, 1974; McConnell, 1981; National Governor's Association, 1986; Southern Regional Education Board, 1988; SCHEV, 1972a, 1973, 1981). As a result, many states have adopted measures of various kinds that are intended to enhance institutional accountability, provide impetus for the reform and improvement of educational practice, or both (Banta & Moffett, 1987; Boyer, Ewell, Finney, & Mingle, 1987; Ewell, 1987a; Ewell & Boyer, 1988).

The wide variance among states in terms of their political culture, economic/social circumstances, and traditional relationships with higher education is highlighted in the case of student assessment. State policies vary from those that have mandated statewide testing of students to those that have sought to encourage institutional reporting on a variety of indicators of effectiveness as part of a general review process.

Assessment in Virginia has been marked by some important contrasts with other states that have called for such activities. In Florida and Texas, legislators have been much more assertive than their counterparts in Virginia in pressing for assessment and evaluation activities in higher education. South Dakota and New Jersey have traditions of relatively strong, centralized decision making in higher education, while Virginia higher education has tended to be more decentralized. Missouri's governor personally challenged institutions to plan and implement assessment programs, while recent Virginia governors have been much less aggressive in seeking change. Rather than rely on statewide testing or other prescriptive approaches to the assessment of

student learning and outcomes, Virginia followed a more institution centered approach.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was threefold: to explain the origins of assessment policy in Virginia; to determine the current attitudes of state policy makers towards and expectations for assessment; and to analyze the implications and apparent direction of assessment policy in Virginia.

Methods and Data Sources:

Primary data for this study included:

1) document sources, including official State Council of Higher Education (SCHEV) reports since 1958, legislative commission reports on the status of higher education, and reports and manuals of executive agencies; and
2) interviews with public officials including the Director of the State Council, the Secretary of Education, legislators holding memberships in key policy and finance committees, current and former presidents and executive officers of major state universities, and key staff people within executive, legislative, institutional, and independent agency organizational structures.

The Development of Assessment Policy in Virginia

The authority and responsibilities of the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) have grown incrementally since its establishment in 1956. In its early years, SCHEV was supported primarily by Virginia's governors and largely ignored by the institutions and the legislature (Kellogg, 1974). As time

passed, the agency's role as a coordinating board was more fully developed. Commission reports on higher education in 1965 and 1974 called for strengthening SCHEV's powers concomitant with increased responsibilities. Following the 1974 report, SCHEV's authority was expanded, but it remained in a primarily advisory capacity as a coordinating agency for the loose confederation of colleges and universities that comprise the Virginia system of higher education. Even as the legislature granted SCHEV greater authority, it reiterated the importance of the traditions of Virginia higher education, calling upon the Council, "insofar as practicable", to "preserve the individuality, traditions and sense of responsibility of the respective institutions" (Code of Virginia, Section 23-9.6:1(n).

Historically, three general factors helped set the stage for the development of assessment in Virginia:

1) SCHEV's long term interest in academic quality and its commitment to "institutional excellence" had been described for many years. Since the late 1960s, SCHEV has repeatedly emphasized institutional quality that would stem from the mission and role of each institution under the oversight and authority of the Boards of Visitors (SCHEV, 1967a, 1972a, 1979a, 1981).

2) In the 1980s, SCHEV has sought to follow a more assertive path in forging a guiding vision for higher education. SCHEV Executive Director Gordon Davies has emphasized SCHEV's role in providing guidance for the future direction of higher education in Virginia. According to Davies, SCHEV has raised "uncomfortable questions, and ... intend[s] to keep raising them." He added,

"that means that for a number of people it is better if we go away. That's too bad. But that's our job."

3) State officials became interested in finding new approaches to using budgetary tools to shape institutional behavior. The state's commitment in the late 1970s to a modified system of program budgeting highlighted questions of program efficiency and effectiveness. By 1984, attitudes within SCHEV, the executive, and legislative branches reflected growing national recognition of the limitations of formula funding. Public officials expressed interest in linking funding with institutional efforts to improve undergraduate learning (National Governor's Association, 1986), giving SCHEV greater opportunities to use the budget to promote change by providing incentives to institutions that responded to state priorities (Davies, 1987).

A Chronology of Assessment in Virginia

While assessment policy in Virginia emerged from the combined influences of many factors, three stand out:

1) SCHEV's determination to promote curricular reform at the undergraduate level;
2) a "national mood" reflected in the contemporary literature calling for assessment of student learning and institutional reform;
3) SCHEV's anticipation of the assessment movement that was gaining force nationally and within the state legislature.

In the early 1980s, SCHEV sought ways to translate the long standing ideals of quality, accessibility, and accountability into specific action to affect institutional practice. Statements

in the 1981, 1983, and 1985 Virginia Plan for Higher Education reflected growing attention to matters of institutional quality and outputs. The emphasis on institutional quality also tied in to SCHEV's mandate to identify and discontinue "unproductive" academic programs. So in addition to looking for ways to encourage quality, SCHEV sought more meaningful ways to look at program productivity than simply counting numbers of graduates. But counting graduates revealed to SCHEV staff, in the words of one, that "a number of programs that could be thought of as part of the core of a liberal arts college appeared to be very unproductive." This induced SCHEV to begin a series of annual statewide reviews of various disciplines as an initial way, according to a former SCHEV official, to be "more active rather than reactive in helping to shape the curriculum [and] in helping to force institutions to pay some attention to what was going on in the curriculum."

In 1984 SCHEV sponsored a statewide conference on revitalizing and reforming undergraduate curricula in the arts and sciences as another approach to getting institutions to think more deeply about what was happening in undergraduate education in general. Davies called this conference "the first systematic foray of this agency into the curriculum and its first vigorous statement about its priority being the undergraduate curriculum." The intent, he said, was to begin "to set an agenda for higher education that was more than the usual banalities of planning: access, excellence, and accountability" (Davies, 1989).

By 1985 there was growing, but still modest, interest within

the state legislature in the assessment issue. Key legislators were familiar with the activities of national and regional education organizations, and SCHEV officials were asked to respond to questions from senators on how Virginia colleges and universities were addressing the issues raised in the 1984 National Institute of Education report Involvement in Learning. Most significantly, however, a senator indicated interest in the possibility of introducing legislation that might link assessment of student learning to institutional funding, along the lines of the model advocated by the Southern Regional Education Board and used by Tennessee.

Initial discussion of the assessment issue led to a study resolution, Senate Joint Resolution 125 (1985), which called upon SCHEV to conduct a study of approaches to measuring student learning. The resulting report was accepted in 1986 as Senate Document 14 (1986). In it, SCHEV reiterated its long held contention that statewide testing was not an attractive option for Virginia. Instead, it was suggested that institutions be allowed to develop their own means of assessing student achievement. Legislators accepted this approach, and in Senate Joint Resolution 83 (1986) requested that all public institutions of higher education in Virginia "establish programs to measure student achievement." SCHEV was called upon to work with the institutions in developing guidelines for assessment programs, and to report the results of these programs in the biennial editions of The Virginia Plan for Higher Education.

Although a June 1987 deadline for submission of institutional

assessment plans to SCHEV had been announced the previous November, many institutions moved slowly in taking any serious action on assessment. Any sense of urgency in regard to submitting the plans was perhaps not felt by most institutions until May 1987 when a budget guidance memo from the governor linked institutional eligibility for a number of incentive funding programs to SCHEV approval of an assessment plan. This action gave SCHEV a large measure of new strength to wield in its push to get institutions to undertake assessment seriously (Davies, 1989; Ewell, 1988b; Gross, 1989; Potter, 1989). It also served to make the initial institutional response to assessment much more a matter of compliance, reinforcing suspicions held by some that SCHEV's commitment to assessment as an institutional program aimed at academic improvement was more style than substance. However, others saw the same measure as an appropriate means of stimulating action on an issue of importance and value to the state and to the institutions themselves.

Continuing suspicions of SCHEV's motives for assessment became evident in reaction to the January, 1989 introduction of Senate Bill 534, which called for the addition of assessment to SCHEV's responsibilities under the Code of Virginia. The bill was proposed at the recommendation of Secretary of Education Donald Finley as a way to insure the continuation of assessment activities beyond the end of the current governor's term in office. In spite of the misgivings of many individuals within the colleges and universities, the bill passed without public dissent, with the support of the Secretary of Education, the Gov-

ernor, SCHEV, and no serious opposition from the institutional presidents or within the legislature.

Expectations for Assessment in Virginia

Although SCHEV has sought to de-emphasize the accountability aspect of assessment, it remains an important component of the process, if only by implication. Accountability calls forth expectations that institutions are responsible to explain to the public what they are doing and how well they are doing it. Thus, by definition assessment includes important elements of accountability. Although strongly emphasizing assessment for improvement, Virginia, like other states, seeks evidence and assurances that institutions are committed to substantive processes of self-evaluation and improvement. These expectations, however, are coupled with limited reporting requirements, which makes the assessment process an essentially symbolic form of accountability to state authorities.

What will constitute acceptable evidence of institutional quality to SCHEV, the legislature, or the executive branch has not been communicated clearly to institutions. In fact, perhaps the most striking feature of the assessment process in Virginia was the quality of communication between SCHEV and the institutions. Proponents of assessment have tended to see communications from the state as promoting a very positive program, while opponents interpret the same information as demonstrating the punitive attitude of the state toward their institution - evidence of what Ewell has called the "fondest hope/worst fear" phenomenon. This has been a key factor in SCHEV's difficulties in

communicating their intentions and expectations for institutional assessment. SCHEV's commitment to curricular improvement has simply not been wholly trusted by many within the institutions, in spite of efforts to emphasize local initiative and control of the process and products of assessment. Even the degree of unity that top state officials have shown in supporting assessment has been taken by some institutional officials as evidence of conspiracy.

It is important to note also that, while SCHEV is not fully trusted by many of the institutions of higher education, the agency is also held somewhat suspect by officials of both the legislative and executive branches of state government. Although SCHEV is respected and generally held in high regard, they are criticized for taking what is seen as an advocacy role for the institutions. The expectations faced by SCHEV from its multiple constituencies place it in a very ambiguous position politically, and contribute to the wide discrepancies in interpretations of its communications.

SCHEV's Expectations

As the July 1989 deadline for full institutional reports on assessment drew closer, SCHEV staff continued to insist that their expectations for data from institutions were minimal. To underline that contention, a February 1989 memo from SCHEV to the chief academic officers in the institutions (Miller, 1989a) stated that if any institutions were uncomfortable with reporting test scores or similar kinds of data to SCHEV, they need not do so, but could simply qualitatively summarize the data.

SCHEV's expectations for the assessment reports were limited by a number of factors:

1) the guidelines for assessment were so broad and general and institutional plans varied to such a large degree that reports would necessarily vary significantly;
2) specific expectations for assessment had never been articulated. The process was seen to an important degree as a catalyst that would stimulate self-directed institutional reform;
3) limitations on agency staff and other resources placed restrictions on the amount of data that could be effectively dealt with.

State Officials' Expectations

The expectations of most state officials interviewed were aptly summarized by SCHEV's Davies, who asserted that what they want to know is that institutions are

> examining their assumptions and their results. They do not want to establish the criteria for accountability. They want to know that institutions are behaving responsibly ... I believe that the institution, in order to warrant this grant of responsibility, should be willing to assure the public that it maintains a thoughtful and questioning stance toward its own standards (Davies, 1989).

Legislative action on assessment must be taken within the context of that body's traditional deference to higher education. Legislators take great pride in Virginia's institutions of higher education, and want to support "their" colleges and universities. Despite this high level of interest, the General Assembly has

followed and continues to follow a general "hands off" philosophy in regard to the internal functions and administration of colleges and universities. The legislature has been responsive to the arguments of SCHEV and the institutions that one of the strengths of Virginia higher education is its diversity and the need to recognize institutional individuality.

In reference to assessment as a specific policy enacted by their authority, legislators generally demonstrated little knowledge or awareness. Most legislators simply did not seem to have any specific expectations for assessment. The general sense was that only a "damning" report from SCHEV on the state of higher education in Virginia would touch off a serious debate in the legislature on this issue.

Officials within the executive branch likewise indicated that they have no expectations for assessment beyond that institutions undertake the process seriously and use the information generated by the resultant processes constructively for purposes of institutional and program improvement. As described by Secretary of Education Finley, the Virginia approach to assessment was an effort to engender a situation in which

> the results are going to be more long term and better if we try to build a mechanism that allows the faculty and students to do it themselves, under a very decentralized model, and trust them to carry forth; and that again will be much more productive than trying to drive something home ... out of Richmond (Finley, 1989).

Implications of Assessment in Virginia

Policy Priorities for Higher Education

The results of a recent national survey of institutions of higher education conducted by the American Council on Education showed assessment ranked tenth out of thirteen "challenges facing institutions in the next five years" in the minds of senior administrators (Chronicle, 1989b, p. 24). Similarly, assessment is not the guiding issue in discussions of the condition of higher education in Virginia among most Virginia officials. Issues of enrollments, tuition levels, and system capacity in anticipation of significant growth in the state's numbers of high school graduates over the next decade are currently ascendant on the public policy agenda.

Assessment as a Component of the Budget

In Virginia, there is clear interest in providing support for efforts to improve the quality of institutions. However, even the very few who conceded that assessment could potentially alter the formula funding guidelines were adamant in their opinions that Virginia will never follow the route of Tennessee in explicitly linking performance on mandated measures to institutional funding. Furthermore, there was no support for the notion that assessment will result in budget cuts for institutions that might somehow be judged to be doing an unsatisfactory job.

Assessment and the Power of SCHEV

While there is no expressed interest or apparent support, particularly within the legislature, of seeing SCHEV become a "superboard", or even to significantly expand or change its powers (Bennett, 1989; Randall, 1989), there was widespread concern that assessment would be used by SCHEV to expand its power vis a

vis the institutions. These concerns were heightened by the passage of Senate Bill 534, which amended the Code of Virginia to add assessment to the list of SCHEV's general duties. In regard to the content of the bill and the charge to carry out assessment, the bill was consistent with policy and practice followed thus far. Making assessment a matter of law rather than legislative opinion, however, gave SCHEV a more substantial basis for its authority to call upon institutions to comply with assessment requirements. Legislators were somewhat nonchalant over concerns that the bill enhanced SCHEV's powers relative to the institutions. One senator who has worked closely with assessment policy stated that if "it doesn't work out, we can change it next year."

Assessment and the Renewal of Teaching and Learning

There was a strong sense within SCHEV that from the perspective of the "general taxpayer in Virginia" the undergraduate teaching mission of colleges and universities is a key reason why public funds are invested in higher education. As a component of the dissatisfaction with the state of the arts and sciences at the undergraduate level, one of the anticipated effects of assessment was to focus more attention on teaching and learning within the university. There was a perception not only within SCHEV, but also the legislature, and to some extent, the Department of Planning and Budget, that the undergraduate teaching mission of the universities had been shortchanged over time and needed a stimulus. Within institutions there were similar expressions of concern for what one senior administrator called the "flight from undergraduate teaching" in higher education.

Assessment is one way in which the state has nudged institutions to respond to this concern, and will continue to do so.

Discussion

Virginia in the Context of Other States

Contemporary with and following the Virginia mandate, most states that have called for specific assessment activities have focussed on issues of academic quality and effectiveness and have avoided simplistic approaches to accountability. They have, by and large, stressed the development of institutionally designed plans and procedures appropriate to their unique needs and circumstances (Carlisle, 1988; Ewell, 1989a, 1989b). Through the middle of 1989 no states have followed the centralized programs exemplified by Florida and Tennessee, and only two states have planned statewide testing since 1986 - New Jersey and Texas.

As in Virginia, recent state assessment plans have had their origins in higher education agencies. In fact, since 1987 no state assessment mandate has emerged as a legislative initiative, suggesting that state higher education officials have taken the initiative in responding to interest in centrally initiated policy aimed at the improvement and insurance of program quality (Ewell, 1989b; Fox, 1989; Hillman, 1989; Krech, 1989). In seeking to anticipate legislative or executive interest in assessment, the higher education communities have been able to retain a great deal of discretionary authority over the shape of such activities and requirements. However, institutions and state higher education agencies must address tasks of planning, implementing, and perhaps most importantly, reporting on assessment in

ways that will be credible in the eyes of critical constituencies.

Virginia's case will be an important benchmark in seeing if flexible and broad reporting requirements can be appropriate and useful to both institutions and state officials. States now in the early stages of assessment have looked carefully at Virginia in searching for a workable model of state assessment policy (Carrier, 1989; Davies, 1989; Ewell, 1989b; Mullen, 1989). As assessment has taken shape in Virginia, SCHEV has frequently repeated the theme that the institutions must prove that the decentralized, campus-centered approach is superior to a centralized, standardized system. The critical question is whether state officials can define system wide standards for effectiveness that make sense to policy makers and don't compromise appropriate institutional autonomy.

State officials have not pressed for programs that compromise institutional autonomy in most states (Ewell, 1989; Davies, 1989), but they do expect meaningful activity on the part of institutions. As Adelman (1989) has suggested, the key to the state interest in academic outcomes is assurance, or reassurance, that it can be demonstrated that things of value and importance happen to people as a result of being college students and that graduates have reasonable levels of skills to show for their degrees. Policy makers want and need data to help them evaluate and justify large public expenditures on higher education. If institutions adopt stances toward assessment that make it no more than an administrative reporting task, opportunities to maintain

institutional discretion in the assessment process may be undermined. Poorly planned and executed strategies for assessment that aim at a minimum level of acceptable performance may result in impacts undesired by institutions and initially unintended by state policy makers, making institutional fears of standardization and escalating state intervention a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Virginia and New Jersey: Similar Rhetoric -- Different Models

Among the states that have called for assessment, one with which the Virginia assessment approach is fruitfully compared is New Jersey. There, the state Board of Higher Education was the source of the assessment mandate, with highly visible political support from the legislature and governor. In 1987 the state set forth a detailed state plan for assessment. Policy makers sought to develop a comprehensive approach without tieing the process to strict and simplistic measures of accountability. Like their counterparts in Virginia, they have asserted that their interest is in stimulating improvement within the framework of institutional mission and initiative (Ewell, 1989a, 1989c).

Key differences between the Virginia and the New Jersey plans for assessment can be summarized briefly: where Virginia has given institutions very broad and general guidelines for planning, implementing and reporting on assessment activities, New Jersey has provided extensive guidelines and suggestions for institutional procedures and perhaps most importantly has devoted considerable resources to the development of a statewide test of general intellectual skills (Ewell, 1989b).

The crucial element of the New Jersey approach is the potential of the system to generate a uniform database that will facilitate judgement on the benefits of the state investment in higher education. The New Jersey program has been well-funded, has strong political support, and has been given a long time line for full development and implementation. If the New Jersey program fails to live up to expectations, it will provide a clear signal to other states of the difficulty of success in pinning down and measuring higher education outcomes (Ewell, 1989c).

Both Virginia and New Jersey are now entering critical periods in their development and events over the next few years will demonstrate the viability and value of each. Both approaches may enjoy successes, in different ways and to different degrees. Indeed, the variety of political, social, and economic state environments suggests that variations on more or less centralized approaches to assessment may be appropriate to different states.

National Standards

Virginia's policy was developed in the years immediately following the 1984 adoption of new standards for institutional effectiveness by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), the southeast's regional accrediting body. The SACS standards called for evaluation of conditions beyond traditional accreditation criteria of faculty and student quality, physical plant, and institutional resources, to include "the evaluation of the results of education and plans for the improvement of the institution's programs" (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 1986, p. 6). While particular approaches to addressing

the issue of effectiveness were not specified, characteristics that these efforts should include were elaborated. SCHEV staff were well aware of the SACS criteria for institutional effectiveness when they were laying the groundwork for assessment. There was a conscious effort to see that institutional assessment activities could be used to also satisfy SACS' new and more explicit criteria for effectiveness.

While state policy makers were shaping the Virginia plan for assessment, standards for assessment efforts were also being drawn up by the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC). In late 1988, four years after the SACS criteria were adopted, seven guiding principles regarding assessment practices in the states were approved by NASULGC's governing board. Overall, the NASULGC principles advocate recognition of institutional autonomy and that standards and practices be developed by institutions themselves. The Virginia plan has largely followed such precepts, while predating the statement by two years.

The SACS and NASULGC criteria regarding assessment are indicative of the framework for such activities that regional and national higher education associations have encouraged. The Virginia model for assessment, for all of its difficulties in implementation, seems generally to have maintained a balance of the sometimes opposing perspectives of the legitimate interests of the state and the requirements of institutional governance and autonomy.

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